

What Christians Want to Know But Were Afraid to Ask

The Hush of Heaven – Part X

Job 20-21

Introduction

A young Midwestern lawyer suffered such deep depression that his friends actually thought it best to keep all knives and razors out of his personal possession. At age 22, his business venture failed. He ran for state legislature and suffered defeat. Another attempt at business failed shortly thereafter. Then, at the age of 26, the sweetheart he had hoped to marry died unexpectedly, crushing his heart. At the age of 27, he suffered what most believe today to have been a nervous breakdown.

Years later, this lawyer ran for Congress and was defeated. He tried again at age 39, but was defeated again. At age 46, he lost a bid for a seat in the Senate and a year later lost in an attempt to become Vice President. At the age of 49, he suffered another devastating loss for Senate. It was during this time that he broke down again – and wrote in his private journal, “I am now the most miserable man living. Whether I shall ever be better, I cannot tell.”ⁱ

This is not exactly the kind of wondering we would expect the future President of the United States to be asking, but Abraham Lincoln was submerged in grief.

He did get better. In fact, he was perfectly suited to lead our country during one of our darkest hours of civil war. Abraham Lincoln had been prepared for heroic endurance as a future leader.

John Henry Jowett, who passed away in 1923, was at one time considered to be the most influential

Bible teacher in the English-speaking world. Yet he wrote to his friend, “I wish you wouldn’t think I am such a saint. You seem to imagine that I have no ups and downs, but just a level and lofty stretch of spiritual attainment with unbroken joy. By no means! I am often perfectly wretched, and everything appears most murky.”ⁱⁱ

F. B. Meyer, an even earlier best-selling author and Bible teacher of the 1800s, was a man who was as well read by his generation as any Christian author of our generation. However, in his private journal he poured out to God in great frustration this prayer, “Lord, why is Your hand always on the other person.”

This is not exactly a spiritual sounding question – but it is an honest one. It is one you have perhaps struggled with yourself at some point in time, asking, “Lord, why have You opened the windows of blessing on everyone but me?”

This is one of the primary questions racing through the mind and heart of Job by the time we reach chapter 21. Perhaps it is because Zophar has just finished speaking in chapter 20 in his second speech of condemnation and condescending pride.

Zophar Arrogantly Speaks His Mind

Zophar begins to speak his mind in Job 20:2-3.

*Therefore my disquieting thoughts
make me respond, even because of my
inward agitation.*

I listened to the reproof which insults me, and the spirit of my understanding makes me answer.

I just want to say, “You’re insulted?! You’re the one now agitated?! Give me a break!”

Job is even more, the one with calloused friends; the one with fresh graves nearby; the one with oozing, itching skin.

Never mind that – Zophar has something on his mind!

What Zophar will do, in chapter 20, is deliver to Job a speech that Job will, in the next chapter, pick apart.

We could easily outline Zophar’s well-worn clichés with four points.

1. The ungodly do not live very long.

Look at Job 20:4-5.

Do you know this from of old, from the establishment of man on earth,

that the triumphing of the wicked is short, and the joy of the godless momentary?

Skip to Job 20:8-9.

He flies away like a dream, and they cannot find him; even like a vision of the night he is chased away.

The eye which saw him sees him no longer, and his place no longer beholds him.

“Ungodly people do not last very long,” Zophar says.

This makes us wonder what he would say to Noah who was ridiculed and mocked by unbelievers for 120 years (Genesis 6:3), or about the fact that God gave the Canaanite nation more than 400 years before He judged them (Genesis 15:13-16).

The truth is that what we find most troubling is not that unbelievers live a long time, but that the godly live short lives. Missionaries, authors, and pioneers like Jim Elliot, Robert Murray McCheyne, and David Brainerd all died before the age of thirty.

Zophar is convinced, however, of this iron-clad rule – bad people die young and good people live long.

Job will destroy this argument in a moment.

Zophar continues with a second point.

2. The ungodly do not enjoy anything.

Notice Job 20:18.

He returns what he has attained and cannot swallow it; as to the riches of his trading, he cannot even enjoy them.

Skip to Job 20:23.

When he fills his belly, God will send His fierce anger on him and will rain it on him while he is eating.

In other words, the wicked do not even enjoy one meal.

If this is true, then why are there so many secular television programs on cable television that show nothing more than cooking? Unbelievers evidently like food.

Unbelievers enjoy their money and they enjoy their entertainment.

Dr. Howard Hendricks used to say in seminary class, “Don’t take that stuff away from them – it is the anesthetic that helps deaden the pain of an empty life.”

Unbelievers will enjoy what the Bible calls,

. . . the passing pleasures of sin. (Hebrews 11:25b)

3. The ungodly do not die happy.

Zophar says that God will see to this, as he says in Job 20:24,

He may flee from the iron weapon, but the bronze bow will pierce him.

In other words, God will personally hunt the unbeliever who is trying to run away and God will shoot at him with a bronze-tipped arrow that will strike him and kill him.

Continue to Job 20:25b (paraphrased).

. . . he will be surrounded by terror

Zophar ends his unfounded lecture with one more thought.

4. The ungodly do not leave anything behind.

Note Job 20:28.

The increase of his house will depart; his possessions will flow away in the day of His [God’s] anger.

Evidently, Zophar had never heard of trust funds and compounded interest. He lived before John Rockefeller and Paris Hilton.

The truth is that unbelievers scramble all of their lives to buy as much of Babylon as they can, and then they leave it all for their children to inherit, which most often destroys their lives.

Job knows better than this.

Job's Response of Honest Questions

While these men are spouting off clichés, Job is struggling with deeper questions. These are real questions; honest questions – questions that only God and His word could ever answer. Job, however, did not have a copy of the Law, or the Prophets, or David's Psalms, or any of the New Testament.

While Zophar is telling Job that the ungodly do not live long, Job wants to know why the exact opposite is true – the ungodly do live long lives and his own godly children died young.

While Zophar is pontificating that the wicked do not enjoy their wealth, Job is saying, "Hello . . . have you traveled any lately? Have you left your house and gone to your neighbor's for a cookout?"

What will only infuriate Zophar and Eliphaz and Bildad even further is the honest questions that Job implies in his response.

Job's questioning is a classic response. It is like Asaph's response in Psalm 73. Asaph admitted in his journal,

. . . I was envious of the arrogant as I saw the prosperity of the wicked. (Psalm 73:3)

It is questioning like David's, who honestly lamented in his journal the prayer,

How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever?... (Psalm 13:1a)

Believers are not supposed to talk this way. Good Christians do not ask these kinds of questions – or do they?

"Oh God, why is Your hand of blessing always on the other person?"

This is what Christians want to know, but are too afraid to ask.

Job, in fact, will ask eight questions that all Christians have thought about or wanted to ask, but were too afraid to get caught having asked them, or even thinking them. At least eight questions are implied in Job's response to Zophar that opens up eight honest struggles in the heart and life of Job.

1. Question #1: Why does God treat the unbeliever better than He treats me?

Look at Job 21:7.

Why do the wicked still live, continue on, also become very powerful?

Skip to Job 21:9.

Their houses are safe from fear, and the rod of God is not on them.

In other words, "Why do I suffer discipline and heartache, while my unbelieving neighbors and co-workers seem to have the blessing of God?"

2. Question #2: Why do I have financial problems that others do not seem to have?

Look at Job 21:10.

His ox mates without fail; His cow calves and does not abort.

Notice Job 21:13a.

They spend their days in prosperity . . .

Job is honestly asking, "Lord, why is it that the one who never bows his knee to You; who never sees the inside of an altar; who never acknowledges You is getting multiplied herds and flocks from You, while I've faithfully sacrificed to You and look what I get? My herds have been stolen and all my financial resources are gone!"

Perhaps you have asked this question which is implied in Job's lament before an unfair God.

3. Question #3: Why does the unbeliever have plenty of children while I cannot have one?

Look at Job 21:11.

They send forth their little ones like the flock, and their children skip about.

The unbelievers are surrounded by kids that are as plentiful as their flocks of sheep.

Go back to Job 21:8.

Their descendants are established with them in their sight, and their offspring before their eyes,

Not only do unbelievers have children, but they have all their children in their immediate presence. The text says, "in their sight". There are no goodbyes; no long-distance calls; no long trips during Christmas. Unbelievers have their children in their sight – their offspring are before their eyes.

Why? We, as believers, are the ones who know that children are a gift from God. We praise the Creator who approves conception and establishes the home.

Job asks, "Why were my children taken, while unbelievers around me are enjoying family feasts?"

If you think only unspiritual Christians struggle with these questions, think again.

4. Question #4: Why does the unrighteous person enjoy better physical health than I?

Note Job 21:13.

They spend their days in prosperity, and suddenly they go down to Sheol.

In other words, “Unbelievers die without extended illness or trouble.”

This is not a reference to some sort of quick judgment from God, but to a long life and then, sudden death that leaves no room for suffering or anguish or trouble. In other words, unbelievers do not run out of money or Medicare; they have a great checkup with the doctor and are never bothered with wheelchairs, arthritis, bad backs, failing eyes, strokes, surgeries, heart attacks, or any other medical problem. The wicked seem to live in one long progression of good health until they die.

Notice Job 21:23.

[He] dies in his full strength, being wholly at ease and satisfied;

In other words, the ungodly are physically strong; have great check-ups; run with flying colors on the treadmill; have no need for One-A-Day vitamins or fiber or bi-focal lenses.

“Zophar, you’re wrong – bad people die happy!”

People deserving perdition are reveling in prosperity. People without faith are in perfect health. Why?

Job is actually willing to ask this question out loud.

5. Question #5: Why do those who care nothing for God seem to live a carefree life?

Look at Job 21:12.

They sing to the timbrel and harp and rejoice at the sound of the flute.

“Here I am suffering,” Job says, “and I am the God-fearer.”

Unbelievers are the ones playing the music – non-stop. Their lives are nothing but fun and games.

Job goes on in Job 21:14-16a to say, as it were, “If you can believe it,”

They say to God, “Depart from us! We do not even desire the knowledge of Your ways.

“Who is the Almighty, that we should serve Him, and what would we gain if we entreat Him?”

“Behold, their prosperity is not in their hand...”

Job implies, “God is the sovereign who allows unbelievers to have their prosperity. Why doesn’t God cut it off?”

Asaph struggled as well, in Psalm 73:5, when he said,

The wicked are not in trouble as other men, nor are they plagued like mankind.

In other words, they are trouble free; care free; burden free. Life seems so easy to the unbeliever, while the believer is burdened down with so many struggles and trials.

“Lord, why are the scales of justice reversed?!”

Charles Spurgeon, preaching on this text, said, *The prosperous wicked escape the killing toils which afflict the mass of mankind. They have no need to ask, “Where shall we get bread for our children or clothing for our little ones.” Ordinary domestic and personal troubles do not appear to molest them. Fierce trials do not seem to arise to assail them. The unspiritual man is worse than other men, yet he is better off. He deserves the hottest hell, and yet he has the warmest nest.*ⁱⁱⁱ

Job asks the question, “Why is it that people who don’t follow God seem to enjoy the most good?”

This is a question most Christians are afraid to ask.

6. Question #6: Why do the ungodly get the promotions and places of power while I am ignored?

Look at Job 21:17-18.

How often is the lamp of the wicked put out, or does their calamity fall on them?...

Are they as straw before the wind, and like chaff which the storm carries away?

This rhetorical question expects an answer of “No.”

Why do the ungodly get the media attention? Why are the paparazzi not chasing missionaries around the countryside or snapping pictures of people leaving the church grounds?

Asaph put it this way,

Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure and washed my hands in innocence; (Psalm 73:13)

We live for God and the other guy gets the promotion. We walk with Christ and all our friends get married and move away.

Sincerity does not bring success. Purity is not rewarded with a promotion. Why not?!

7. Question #7: Why does God not judge the hypocrisy of sinners so their children will be warned?

Look at Job 21:19-21, as Job says,

[Zophar] You say, "God stores away a man's iniquity for his sons." [I say] Let God repay him so that he may know it.

Let his own eyes see his decay, and let him drink of the wrath of the Almighty.

For what does he care for his household after him, when the number of his months is cut off?

Did you catch the implication of this text? Why not judge the unbelieving father who is content with sin, since by his own actions he really does not care about his children anyway? Why not judge him so that his children will be warned not to follow in his footsteps?

The best thing children could see is their father's sin judged, right? That would be the strongest deterrent to sin.

In early American history, thieves were publicly flogged. Perhaps you have visited Williamsburg, Virginia, and seen the public place where criminals were placed in stocks. Maybe you stepped up to the stocks and put your head through the yoke and your hands and feet through the holes and then stood there wondering what it must have been like.

I am not suggesting we go back to public stocks. However, the absence of judgment on sin – the public silence; even further, the public endorsement and approval and applause of the sinner only paves the way for the next generation to take sin even further.

Sinners get away with their sin, boast of their sin, pursue their sin, flaunt their sin and thus communicate to the next generation that sin pays!

In the book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon wrote,
Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed quickly, therefore the hearts of the sons of men among them are given fully to do evil. (Ecclesiastes 8:11)

If the things people do in Las Vegas stay in Vegas, maybe the things people do in our town will be overlooked too.

The lie about unpunished sin is that maybe God does not really see and if He does, maybe He really does not care.

Job is wondering why God does not judge the unbeliever, but seems to judge faithful believers. This is a question many Christians are afraid to ask.

8. Question #8: Why does God not make those who belong to Him uniquely special to the rest of the world?

When we go to the local elementary school play, as soon as the kid comes on the stage dressed in his elephant costume or a big sunflower seed costume with his face poking through, a camera starts flashing and hands are waving – it is obvious who the parents are. They beam, "That's our child. We are so proud of little Billy that even though he looks absolutely ridiculous in that costume, we are going to take 300 pictures."

We are the sons and daughters of God! We have stepped out on the stage of life and . . . hello? There is no camera; no special announcement; no obvious endorsement; there is not even any protection from the school bully who tells us how dumb we looked as a sunflower.

Job says, "I don't understand why God doesn't make it absolutely clear that the godly are special and unique and that the rest of the world is unimportant."

This is Job's problem in Job 21:23-26.

One dies in his full strength, being wholly at ease and satisfied;

His sides are filled out with fat, and the marrow of his bones is moist,

While another [possibly even a godly man] dies with a bitter soul, never even tasting anything good.

Together they lie down in the dust, and worms cover them.

In other words, in the end, there seems to be no difference whatsoever. Believer and unbeliever; spiritual and pagan are all lumped together in the graveyard at the end of life. The undertaker is the great equalizer. In the end, there is no distinction.

Ah, but the funeral is not the end, is it?

Job says in Job 21:30,

For the wicked is reserved for the day of calamity; they will be led forth at the day of fury.

In other words, they may have had a trouble free few years on earth, but eternity will be filled with fury.

Conclusion

Let me draw two conclusions from these two chapters of Job.

1. **God is neither defeated nor disrupted by the unbelief of sinners.**
2. **God is neither embarrassed nor embittered by the questions of believers.**

These are true even when we wonder aloud in our journal, “Why is the hand of God always on someone else?”

Is this not what asking for wisdom is all about? Perhaps this is the reason James promised us that when we go to God and ask for wisdom, we will not be reproached or rebuked. (James 1:5)

So often our requests for wisdom are preceded by questions about why and how God is operating His world and our lives.

Perhaps you noticed that as Job began to pour out his heart in asking questions that we would never expect a godly person to ask – or even admit to having thought – he began with the word “why”. (Job 21:7)

Why do the wicked still live . . .

“ . . . while, in effect, my family is almost all dead?”

These are honest questions from a grieving man.

I have been enjoying a commentary on the life of Job by Chuck Swindoll, chancellor of Dallas Theological Seminary. In the commentary, Swindoll tells the story of a couple who lived in the same married couples’ apartment complex near the seminary in which he and his wife lived.

Chuck and Dennis were seminary students at Dallas Seminary in the early 1960s. Dennis and his wife, Lucy, became good friends with the Swindoll’s as they slugged their way through seminary.

While at seminary, Dennis and Lucy had a baby boy, whom Dennis absolutely adored. Their little boy was nearly inseparable from Dennis.

After Dennis graduated, they moved to Los Angeles where he advanced his education with the goal of helping people who struggled through difficult childhoods to move on and enjoy productive lives. In the midst of his Ph.D. studies, their little boy stumbled into a swimming pool in a neighbor’s back

yard and drowned. They lost their precious son, which devastated them both – particularly Dennis.

Years later, Dennis admitted to Chuck the way he had responded to this loss, “I got in my car, having just lost my boy, and grabbed the steering wheel and drove almost every freeway in Los Angeles. During those hours, I screamed out to God expressing all the grief and the anger and the sadness and the confusion from deep within my soul. I said things to Him in that car that I’d never said to anybody before. I yelled it out and it wasn’t very nice. I just vomited it out to God.”

About dawn, Dennis finally drove back into the driveway of their small home, his shirt dripping wet with sweat. His hands were still gripping the steering wheel. He turned the key and dropped his head onto the steering wheel, sobbing with giant heaves. He said “I was comforted with this thought: God can handle it! He can handle everything I said.”^{iv}

What a great thought . . . and a humbling truth of God’s condescending grace toward His own.

I am not condoning blasphemy and I am not suggesting taking it out on your best friend.

However, when you finally ask questions – even when you ask them at the top of your lungs – God is listening. He is listening even when you ask those forbidden questions that Christians are not supposed to ask, much less think.

At the end of Job chapter 21, we do not find God wielding a club and saying, “Okay, Job, you’ve gone too far.”

No, God can handle Job. God can handle Job’s questions. He can be sovereign, while at the same time, His children are suffering, and are even confused.

Let me suggest three encouragements for the believer who asks questions that they were once afraid to ask.

1. **Stop comparing your life with unbelievers.**

Stop comparing:

- the number of children or grandchildren;
- the things in the garage;
- the work title;
- the price of furniture and clothing owned.

2. **Stop competing in your walk with other believers.**

Most often we are competing for temporal stuff, ignoring our shared, eternal, unending, never corroding or rusting or perishing inheritance.

The church becomes a place of competition rather than cooperation.

3. Start cherishing what God has given you today.

Job's world did not change – Job will change. Later in this book, God will inform him of everything he had that he had overlooked.

So often we go to God and demand that He change our circumstances. However, God uses circumstances to change us.

Unanswered questions that are honest, open questions have a way of developing character and trust more than quick answers and worn out clichés ever will.

All the while,

[keep] our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of [our] faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

. . . consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

(Hebrews 12:2-3)

So let us stop comparing, stop competing, and start cherishing what we have today, by the grace of God through our persevering, enduring Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 6/24/2007 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Steven Lawson, Holman Old Testament Commentary: Job (Holman, 2004), p. 67.

ⁱⁱ Warren Wiersbe, Job: Be Patient (Victor Books, 1991), p. 75.

ⁱⁱⁱ Charles Spurgeon, The Treasury of David, Volume 2 (Kregel, rep. 1968), p. 312.

^{iv} Charles Swindoll, Job: A Man of Heroic Endurance (W Publishing, 2004), p. 70.